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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO IMMEDIATE 1168
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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR ADMIRAL KEATING'S MEETING WITH
RTARF AT CHOD

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. Admiral Keating, your brief meeting with Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) Chief of Joint Staff General Ratchakrit Kanchanawat at the Chiefs of Defense conference affords a chance to affirm the United States Government's commitment to working with a democratically elected Thai government, to underscore the importance we place on Thailand's political crisis being solved through the political process, and to highlight our support for important areas of our mil-mil relationship such as the Defense Reform Management System (DRMS), Cobra Gold, and Thailand's deployment of peacekeepers to Darfur. END SUMMARY.

ENDURING BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

12. (C) Thai officials have expressed strong interest in hearing U.S. government officials' assessment of the upcoming transition to a new U.S. new administration. We have stressed to the Thai that while President-elect Obama will have the opportunity to shape his own foreign policy, we do not anticipate significant changes in our bilateral relationship due to the history and strength of our alliance and that the nature of U.S.-Thai security, economic, and cultural bonds remain a strong foundation for the relationship.

THAI POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

13. (C) Immediate concerns of a coup in Thailand have faded as the nation focuses on a sequence of major events. Over the course of the next five weeks the Thai government will conduct the funeral for the King's sister Princess Galyani, celebrate the King's birthday in early December, and host the ASEAN summit in mid-December. The Thai political scene, however, remains deeply divided with the royalist elite and urban middle class on one side and the allies of former Prime Minister Thaksin and their upcountry rural supporters on the other. While Army Commander Anupong Paochinda steadfastly remains committed to keeping the army outside politics, there are those on both sides of the political divide who appear willing to engage in violence which could prove an unpredictable trigger for

military intervention.

14. (C) The status quo does not appear to be sustainable. The pro-Thaksin People's Power Party will likely be dissolved, and the follow-on party would almost certainly command a plurality or a majority if new elections were to be called. Possible actions to try to strengthen the two sides positions include forming a new administration, calling new elections, or launching a coup. None of these actions, however, appear likely to lead to resolution of the current divide. As such, political turmoil could very well persist for years. You should praise the Thai military leadership for keeping above the political fray, and reiterate to Ratchakrit that a coup would be seen very negatively internationally and not resolve the underlying causes of the political turmoil. It is important that all parties avoid violence, and respect democratic processes and the rule of law.

COBRA GOLD AND THE MILITARY EXERCISE PROGRAM

15. (C) By means of access to good military base infrastructure and large areas to conduct unrestricted operations, Thailand gives the U.S. military a platform for exercises unique in Asia. We are on track for a very successful iteration of the major JCS-directed COBRA GOLD exercise in February 2009. The exercise will continue to advance our goal of promoting joint and combined military operations in our Cobra Gold partners of Thailand, Indonesia, Japan and Singapore.

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BORDER TALKS BEGIN WITH CAMBODIA

16. (C) We are encouraged that the Thai and Cambodian governments this week began bilateral talks to try to resolve the border dispute that is centered on overlapping claims to territory adjacent to Preah Vihear temple. Talks under the auspices of the Foreign Ministry-Joint Border Commission (JBC) will attempt to address the conflict through negotiations but we are not optimistic for quick resolution to the dispute. Difficult issues lay at the heart of the matter, and continued political conflict in Bangkok may make tough decisions more difficult for the Thai government. We continue to stress to the Thai that we hope that the dispute can be resolved peacefully and bilaterally.

DEFENSE REFORM

17. (C) We have been working closely with the RTARF on the U.S.-funded DRMS project which will help rationalize the Thai military's procurement and other resource needs. Former RTARF Supreme Commander General Boonsrang Niumpradit was a key proponent of defense reform, and your meeting with General Ratchakrit will provide an excellent opportunity to underscore our desire to work closely with the Thai military leadership to accelerate the DRMS process.

PEACEKEEPING EFFORTS

18. (C) Thailand has been an active contributor in peacekeeping missions, best known for leading forces in the UNTAET mission in East Timor. The RTARF has been a close partner for us as the Thai government continues preparations to deploy a battalion of peacekeeping troops to Darfur as UNAMID. With deployment currently scheduled for the May-June 2009 timeframe, we have continued to underscore to the leadership of the Thai military that we stand ready to assist the Thai again where possible.

ENCOURAGING SIGNS ON HMONG ISSUE

¶9. (C) The RTARF has the lead on resolving the difficult problem of the thousands of Hmong from Laos seeking resettlement in the U.S. The Thai government has set up a screening process for the Hmong currently in a camp in Petchaboon province, and we believe that a portion of the group may have a legitimate claim to refugee status and could face harsh treatment by the Lao government if returned. We have been encouraged as the RTARF has recently begun to share valuable information with us. Nonetheless, we want to take every opportunity to underscore to the RTARF the importance of transparently handling these refugee cases.

SOUTHERN THAILAND

¶10. (C) The Thai military, since the installation of General Anupong as Army Commander, has taken a more assertive role in trying to quell the ethnic Malay Muslim-led insurgency in southern Thailand, a region that has witnessed episodic violence since its incorporation into Thailand in 1902. Regional violence has claimed over 3000 lives since January 2004, when the violence began to escalate. The root causes of the insurgency -- government neglect, human rights abuses, and a lack of social justice, combined with a desire for some form of self-determination, have not been addressed by any Thai government to this point. While the Thai military has so far demonstrated the most focus on trying to resolve the situation in the South, efforts on the part of other parts of the government have so far lagged.

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¶11. (C) The Embassy maintains a three-pronged focus to improve our military cooperation in order to address the violence in the South:

- 1) Using our exercise and training program to improve the professional and operational skills of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, especially the Thai Army;
- 2) Helping the Thai break down stovepipes between the Thai military, police forces, and civilian agencies;
- 3) Doing everything we can to ensure the Thai respect international human rights norms as they counter the violence.

JOHN